

AFRIKANS AT THE CROSSROADS - DR. JOHN HENRIK CLARKE



Dr. John Henrik Clarke

Jan. 15, 1915 to Jul. 16, 1998

The following article by excerpted from larger work originally published;
Los Angeles Times, 3/03/1991, Part E, Page 1, "Elder Statesmen An Era Is Passing for Five Authors Known for Reclaiming the Role of Blacks in History," by Yemi Toure

John Henrik Clarke was born in Union Springs, Alabama on New Years Day, 1915. His family came from a long line of sharecroppers.

Clarke noticed that although many bible stories "unfolded in Africa...I saw no African people in the printed and illustrated Sunday school lessons," he wrote in 1985. "I began to suspect at this early age that someone had distorted the image of my people. My long search for the true history of African people the world over began."

That search took him to libraries, museums, attics, archives and collections in Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America and Africa.

What he found was that the history of black people is worldwide; that "the first light of human consciousness and the world's first civilizations were in Africa"; that the so called Dark Ages were dark only for Europe and that some African nations at the time were larger than any in Europe; that as Africa sends its children to Europe to study because that is where the best universities are, early Greece once sent its children to Africa to study because that was where the best universities were; and that slavery, although devastating was neither the beginning nor the end of Black people's impact on the world.

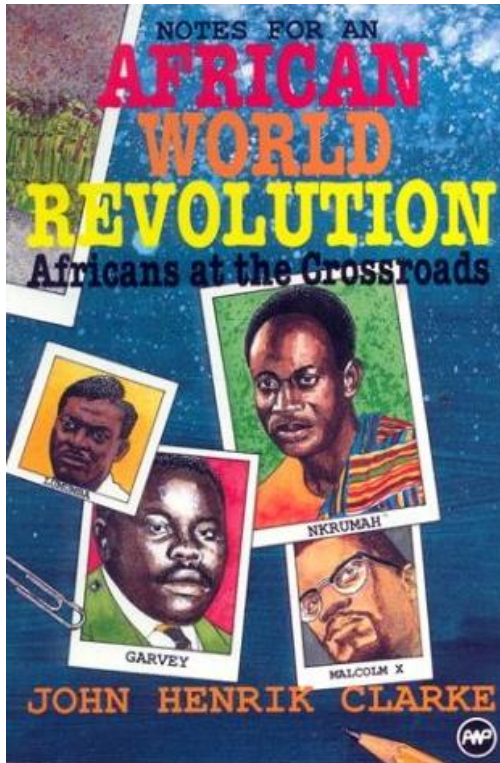
Clarke gathered his findings into books on such figures as the early 20th century mass movement leader Marcus Garvey, into articles with titles like "Africa in the Conquest of Spain" and "Harlem as mecca and New Jerusalem," and many books including American Heritage's two volume "History of Africa."

While he was teaching at Hunter College in New York and at Cornell University in the 1980's, Clarke's lesson plans became well known for their thoroughness. They are so filled with references and details that the Schomburg Library in Harlem asked for copies. Clarke plans to provide them, he said, "so that 50 years from now, when people have a hard time locating my grave, they won't have a hard time locating my lessons."

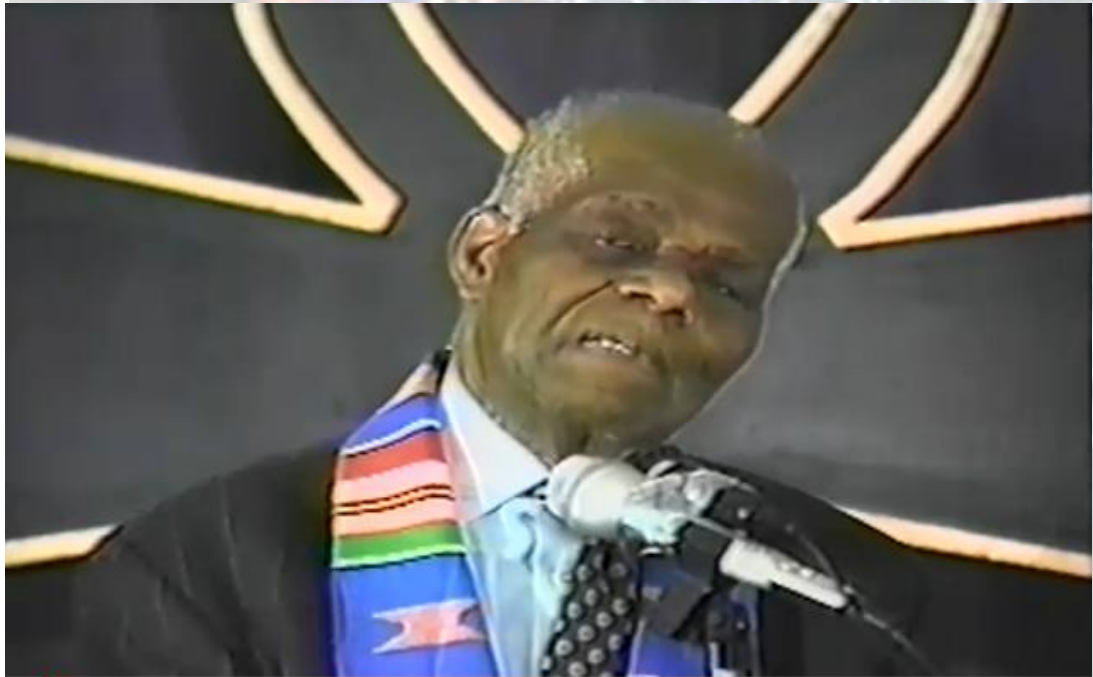
In 1985, the year of his retirement, the newest branch of the Cornell University Library- a 60 seat, 9,000 volume facility- was named the "John Henrik Clarke Africana Library."

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THE ELDER RADICAL-JOHN HENRIK CLARKE- BAD BOY OF ACADEME

<http://www.africanaonline.com/2010/09/john-henrik-clarke-bad-boy-of-academe/>

THE ELDER RADICAL-JOHN HENRIK CLARKE- BAD BOY OF ACADEME Interview with Ja A. Jahannes America's most fervent radical in the 1980s and 90s was not found wearing black power symbols on tee shirts, or dreadlocks, or in the Nation of Islam. America's most fervent black radical did not spew forth racist expletives.

America's foremost black radical was John Henrik Clarke, an 80 year old gentleman from the old South who lived in Harlem. He was a professor Emeritus of Hunter College, who trained generations of freedom fighters to use their minds and history as weapons of liberation. Born in Union Springs, Alabama, January 1, 1915, John Henrik Clarke grew to young manhood in Columbus, Georgia. He moved to New York City in 1933, with the ambition of becoming a writer. He studied history and world literature at New York University. From his early years, Dr. Clarke studied the history of the world and the history of African people in particular. There was no voice in America during this period that spoke singularly and more authoritatively on the plight of African American people than Dr. Clarke. There were few voices that spoke as powerfully of African world history.

Professor Clarke's articles and keynote addresses on African and African-American history, politics and culture have been published in leading journals throughout the world. Professor Clarke has written or edited twenty-two books. The best known are: American Negro Short Stories, 1966,

William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond, 1968, Malcolm X: The Man and His Times, 1969, Harlem, U.S.A., 1971, Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa, 1973, and African World Revolution: Africa At The Crossroads, 1991. He was a galvanizing speaker with few equals. His credits for founding organization that deal with the protection of African and African American life alone would have been enough to enshrine him in African

American history. Yet, he reached young folks and seasoned scholars alike as he traveled throughout the world enlightening people about the heritage of African peoples. Teacher, philosopher, scholar, lecturer, social activist, Dr. John Henrik Clarke was without peer in America history.

I was privileged to serve as Chair of the Pan African Movement USA (PAMUSA) with Dr. Clarke as Co-chair, and took the opportunity on August 23, 1995 to interview him. Knowing his advanced age and sometimes failing health, I wanted future generations to hear from him on a number of topics related to the African American and Pan African experience. Though Dr. Clarke was legally blind, he saw with an appaered clarity the issues that confronted African Americans, Africans and their relationship to the world. Below is that interview, unedited.

JAHANNES: What are the central problems in American society today?

CLARKE: The search for definition, direction and political orientation.

JAHANNES: What kinds of leaders do we need for today in America? In the Black community?

CLARKE: We need leaders who will give us a new vision of ourselves and our future in relation to the search for our definition of self and our political orientation.

JAHANNES: You are in demand as a lecturer around the globe. What are the topics most requested of you to address as a public speaker?

CLARKE: African history, in general, followed by the African family, both at home and abroad, and the African Resistance Movements in the 19th and 20th centuries.

JAHANNES: Since the early days of Black Studies, which you helped pioneer, how far have they come?

CLARKE: Black Studies has made a few steps forward but these have not been giant steps. My personal disappointment is how researchers overlook the very rich and available material on the African people in world history, in Africa, the Caribbean Island, the United States and the impact of the African on Asia, Europe and the Americas.

JAHANNES: What is your view of the current wave called "multiculturalism?"

CLARKE: I think it is a lot of educational fakery which has as its mission the mixing of African history with the history of other cultures to the point where the history of African people will no longer be outstanding.

JAHANNES: What is the impact of Africentrism, in your view?

CLARKE: The whole concept of Africentrism is overestimated. It should have been called "African Consciousness" because without African Consciousness we will have no understanding of our history and its significance to world history.

JAHANNES: Has the Black power revolution of the 1960's been betrayed?

CLARKE: The Black power revolution was betrayed from the beginning by its creators. It was further betrayed by those that inherited it.

JAHANNES: What is the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement?

CLARKE: Frustration, disappointment, broken hopes, broken dreams. '

JAHANNES: I will mention some of the issues that invariably characterize any discussion of African American life, whether rightly or wrongly, and ask you to comment on them. Welfare.

CLARKE: Where Black people are concerned welfare is a sham because most of the people in this nation one way or another are on some form of welfare.

JAHANNES: Drugs in inner cities.

CLARKE: Drugs are not controlled by the victims. The victims have no way of controlling the entry of drugs into this country. The small seller of drugs are the victims in the final analysis.

JAHANNES: Unwed mothers in the African American community.

CLARKE: Numerically there are just as many unwed mothers outside of the African American community. We need to put more emphasis on this statistic.

JAHANNES: What is your opinion of historically Black colleges and universities?

CLARKE: I believe profoundly in the existence of Black colleges and universities because people rise and fall within the context of these institutions. Some of these institutions are stillborn children who never developed into manhood or womanhood and not a single one of them is fully dedicated to teaching students about Africa from an African point of view.

JAHANNES: Recently you gave some of your papers and books to Clark Atlanta University. Why did you make this gift to Clark Atlanta University and what was included in the collection?

CLARKE: My personal library of relevant books on African and African American history will go to the Robert Woodruff Library at Clark Atlanta University. My personal papers will be deposited at the Schomburg Center for the Study of Black Culture in Harlem. The significance of my gift to Clark Atlanta is that I was born in Alabama, grew up in Georgia and wanted to make this donation to one of the states that nurtured me. Clark Atlanta has the best facilities for maintaining a library of this size.

JAHANNES: The library at Cornell University is named in your honor. What is the significance of this honor to you?

CLARKE: The significance of this honor to me is that the Africana Center at Cornell, like the Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies is one of my two academic homes. In my three years as Distinguished Visiting Professor at Cornell, I not only did some of my best teaching, I learned to be a better teacher by becoming a better human being.

JAHANNES: Can African Americans get a decent education in predominantly white colleges and universities?

CLARKE: African Americans can get a decent "Western Education" in predominantly white universities that they can adapt to their own needs if they have the insight and intellectual industry to do so.

JAHANNES: What do you view as essential to the Black man who would presume to be educated?

CLARKE: Simply, a knowledge of his own people and how they relate to the people of the world.

JAHANNES: You have been critical of Islam as a religion, and Arabs as despoilers of Africa? Why do you hold these views?

CLARKE: I hold these views because they are true. The Arabs like all invaders of Africa did Africa more harm than good. They have used Islam to subjugate people instead of enhancing them spiritually. Islam has and has always been the handmaiden of Arab design. The Arabs were in the slave trade before Islam and to some extent they are still in the slave trade today.

JAHANNES: What is your definition of racism?

CLARKE: Race is a myth because nature created no races. Racism is a derogatory manifestation of this myth and the concept that people by virtue of race are better than other people.

JAHANNES: DuBois said the problem of the 20th century was the problem of race? Is there the potential for man to overcome racism in the 21 century?

CLARKE: DuBois actually said the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line. I extend his comment by saying that the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the culture line and the political line. We can overcome the problem of race by becoming enough to ignore racists or isolate them.

JAHANNES: As a writer of fiction, you have published over fifty short stories that have been distributed in this country and abroad, including your best known short story, "The Boy Who Painted Christ Black," which been translated into more than a dozen languages. Why have never written a novel?

CLARKE: I have written several novels. None of them have been published. My main novel, Journey to the Fair, deals with a young kid who hoboed across country on his way to the Chicago World's Fair. It is somewhat autobiographical and it is some of the best writing I have ever done. For over 20 years I have been trying to get back to it.

JAHANNES: Of your many published works, short stories, poems, essays, histories, etc. which of them are you most proud of and why?

CLARKE: Africans At The Crossroads: Notes For An African World Revolution. This is the book I have always wanted to write.

JAHANNES: Some critics, like historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Pulitzer Prize winning historian, in his new book The Disuniting Of America: Reflections On A Multicultural Society, sees the African American intellectual discovery of self as a hustle by misguided and miseducated Black social scientists. Schlesinger has scoffed at your view of history and implied that it is less than accurate. How do you respond?

CLARKE: The accuracy of my view of history is what frightens Professor Schlesinger. It is the truth of it that he cannot live with. The truth is that a bunch of frightened people came out of Europe to colonize the truth about the world. The truth of my history exposes the lie of their history.

JAHANNES: You have visited every country in Africa except South Africa. Have you deliberately avoided South Africa?

CLARKE: Yes. I have deliberately avoided South Africa because some of the political activists have asked me to do so. They believe some whites would misinterpret my visit to their detriment. I have not visited South Africa out of respect for their wishes.

JAHANNES: What are the prospects for peace and democracy in South Africa?

CLARKE: There are no prospects for peace and democracy in South Africa as long as the power is held by whites and white-approved blacks. After the revolution, which must come, and it is a revolution that Africans must win, I hope you will ask me the same question again.

JAHANNES: You have been called "radical" often. What is your view of a radical in America? When people call you a radical what do you think they mean by it?

CLARKE: I think they mean a person that dares to disagree with the norm, when the norm does not serve the best interests of the people. I believe a radical is one who dares to search for the truth, expose it, live with it, even if it is against him or herself.

JAHANNES: It is reputed that although you are 85% blind, you read about ten books each week?

CLARKE: In fact I have less than 2% vision which makes me 98% blind. I read by either having books read to me or I read them on my reading machine for the blind or from cassettes sent by the Lighthouse For the Blind.

JAHANNES: What books would you recommend as essential to read for a sound grounding in African history and African American survival issues?

CLARKE: For a good grounding in African history and African America survival, I recommend some simplified works first. Lerone Bennett's 'Before the Mayflower' is well written and is good reading. They should also read John Hope Franklin's 'From Slavery to Freedom'. I would recommend for a good overview of slavery they should read John Blassingame's 'The Slave Community', and the books by Carter G. Woodson should not be ignored. Especially his works, 'The Negro in Our History', and 'The Miseducation of The Negro'. In African history, a few books would serve as an overview. John G. Jackson's 'Introduction to African Civilizations', Joseph Harris' 'African People and Their History'. The heavy weights in the fields, Chancellor William's 'Destruction of Black Civilizations', and his neglected work, 'The Birth of African Civilization'. Another heavy weight is Cheikh Anta Diop: definitely read his 'African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality' and his the last work he completed before his death, 'Civilization or Barbarism'. For an understanding of Caribbean history, definitely read Eric Williams, 'The Caribbean from Columbus to Castro', and his work, 'Capitalism to Slavery: Documents in West Indian History'. For the importance of the African in world history, they should read three special issues of the 'Journal of African Civilizations', edited by Ivan Van Sertima read 'Africa in Early America', 'Africa in Early Asia', and 'Africa in Early Europe'. Reading these books will eventually lead to other books. Reading books should be like an addiction. It should take over your life and you should never let it go. Reading is the only positive addiction I know.

JAHANNES: What is your view of what is needed to get the masses of African Americans out of this self-destructive abyss they seem to be in?

CLARKE: First, we would have to understand that war has been declared on the African American family and this war shows no mercy. If we are to stop the war or slow it down, we might have to break some TVs or burn some Bibles. Religion, which should be our spiritual, physical, and our financial liberation, is so large in our lives we are imprisoned by it. No people will prosper without a knowledge of their history that they can respect. This is where you start to use history to tell your time of day, wherever you are.

JAHANNES: What is the quality of African American leadership, today?

CLARKE: As a people, we have more leaders and less leadership than other people. A lot of people we accept as leaders are showmen, some good, some bad.

JAHANNES: Some names seem synonymous with leadership of African American people. Please comment on a few of them.

JAHANNES: Marcus Garvey.

CLARKE: Marcus Garvey was the finest leader to emerge in the African world in the 20th century.

JAHANNES: W. E. B. DuBois. CLARKE: DuBois was an intellectual leader, emphasis on intellectual, and the finest leader of this caliber we produced outside of Africa.

JAHANNES: Martin Luther King Jr.

CLARKE: King was a great spiritual leader and one of America's greatest theologians, black or white.

JAHANNES: Farrakhan.

CLARKE: I consider Farrakhan part leader, part showman, part faker.

JAHANNES: Jesse Jackson. CLARKE: I am not too clear where Jesse Jackson is leading us or if he is worthy of being called a leader. Of all the black men of the 20th century, he had the finest opportunity of becoming a leader. He sacrificed this potential to the altar of his ego.

JAHANNES: Is violence ever necessary in the African American struggle for equality and freedom in America?

CLARKE: Among all people in their struggle for freedom there is a time for violence. It cannot be avoided. Violence at the right time is right, at the wrong time, it is wrong.

JAHANNES: Why haven't African Americans and Africans on the continent come together for economic and political self help?

CLARKE: Africans and African Americans have not come together because both of them are still listening to the voices of their former slave masters and their former colonial master. You cannot help yourself until you know yourself. You cannot change the world until you change yourself.

JAHANNES: Why does the Caribbean, with its heavy African descendant populations, continue to be exploited by white America and European economic interests?

CLARKE: Caribbean people have a color fascination different from other people living outside of Africa and too many of them believe white is right.

JAHANNES: What is the real threat of Cuba to the U.S.?

CLARKE: The real threat of Cuba, as it is conceived, is that the Cubans might develop a type of government that is viable without it being capitalist. People have a right to develop a form of government that suits their needs but America considers this a threat in the western hemisphere.

JAHANNES: Why has Haiti suffered so profoundly and so long? How do we end Haiti's suffering?

CLARKE: Haiti still suffers because the U. S. and Europe do not want the example of a former slave state to be successful anywhere in the world.

JAHANNES: You have said that you believe white men do not like women. What do you mean by that?

CLARKE: Their treatment of women manifest a desire to either dominate or avoid them. They consider women a threat to their manhood. Because they have a question with their manhood, they created a situation that would not have existed if they were secure.

JAHANNES: In your book *African World Revolution: Africans At The Crossroads* you ask the question "Can African People Save Themselves?" Can they? What will it take?

CLARKE: No people will save themselves until they know themselves and are willing to make sacrifices on behalf of themselves.

JAHANNES: Why is it that little is known of African peoples in Asia, in Europe, in the Polynesian and Melanesian islands?

CLARKE: Little is known of Africans throughout the world because we live in a Eurocentric intellectual universe. The rulers of this universe intent to project the concept that the world waited in darkness for Europeans to bring the light. The exact opposite is true.

JAHANNES: Is there still a crisis among African American intellectuals?

CLARKE: If ignorance is a crisis then the answer is "yes." I am not a believer in Harold Cruse's (author of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*) imagined crisis among black intellectuals; his crisis is more about Harold Cruse's personal intellectual crisis.

JAHANNES: Who are the scholars you most respect?

CLARKE: The present day scholars I most respect are Jacob Carruthers and his new work on Egypt and the Caribbean Islands, especially Haiti. Sterling Stuckey, his new approach to slave cultures and the ideology of Black Nationalism. Anderson Thompson's new approach to the politics of the civil rights movement. Joseph Harris, of Howard University, and his approach to African world history. Among the African historians that I have great respect for are Theophile Obenga, protégé of Cheikh Anta Diop; Father Mbane, a neglected Jesuit priest who writes more history than he teaches; and Joseph Gazebo, who is only second to Cheikh Anta Diop in a new approach to African history.

JAHANNES: Who have been some of your protégés?

CLARKE: Both Jacob Carruthers and Iva Carruthers of Chicago. Frank Scruggs, a young lawyer in Florida. Professor William Drake of Virginia Commonwealth University, and Professor Ralph Crowder of Purdue University, Professor Dona Richards of Hunter College, and many others.

JAHANNES: Do African American writers have any obligation to the African American experience?

CLARKE: Yes, as much obligation as all other writers and the same obligation as other African Americans.

JAHANNES: What would you want your legacy to be?

CLARKE: That I used my life to make a positive statement about the right of African people to be sovereign rulers of that piece of geography called Africa and to walk this earth with peace and dignity, giving the same respect to others that they would ask for themselves. c. 1995 by Ja A. Jahannes

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Dr. Ja A. Jahannes is a psychologist, educator, writer, and a social critic. He is a frequent columnist for numerous publications. His work has appeared in such diverse publications as the Journal of Ethnic Studies, Vital Speeches, the Journal of the National Medical Association, Ebony, the Black Scholar, Encore, Class, Black Issues in Higher Education and the Saturday Review. He was national chair of the Pan African Movement U.S. A. (PAMUSA) with Dr. John Henrik Clarke as co-chair in 1992 and 1993. Dr. Jahannes has lectured throughout the U. S., in Africa, Asia, South America and the Middle East. Please contact the author for questions and comments at Jahannes@Africanaonline.com

PhotoCredit: Roland L. Freeman. Photo Content: Dr. Asa Hilliard III; Dr. Ja A. Jahannes, Chair, Pan African Movement USA (PAMUSA); and Dr. John Henrik Clarke, Co-chair, at Pan African Conference, Colony Square Hotel, Atlanta, GA 1993.

Portrait of a Liberation Scholar

by John Henrik Clarke

http://www.africawithin.com/clarke/portrait_of_a_liberation_scholar.htm

Almost from the beginning as a child I started to raise essential questions inside myself about the things I observed, and about the things people declared "true" and literally dared me to question. These who would impose the "truth" on me had no control over me when I was alone. I would question their truth and keep my conclusions to myself. I did not argue with them about what I thought or felt because I never told them. I lived inside myself seemingly forever and hoped for the day when I could speak my mind.

Essential Questioning

The earliest and most persistent question that came to my mind while growing up in a strict Baptist household and a very religious family was why do we use God to excuse so many man-made things, so much man-made misery? People in my family, community and race attribute to God a lot of things which are ungodly, and then claim that God will straighten them out in the by-and-by. We seem not to want to understand that God did not mess things up in the first place. We have made a folklore out of this limited view of God and out of God-dependency as a spiritual necessity when we gave up on ourselves or others. We say that we have done all you can for them and then leave them alone. God will fix it by-and-by. Why must God fix something that God did not initiate and did not cause? What kind of God is this, or, more precisely, what kind of faith is this?

I believe that if God was merciful enough to give you a brain, two functioning hands, and two legs where you put one in front of the other, then God has given you the facility to take care of yourself, to be responsible for your actions and for what happens to you. This is as self-evident to me as abilities to taste and to distinguish between a flower and an ear of corn. We use God as an excuse for not taking responsibility for our lives. This was not an anti-God argument. We have drawn the wrong conclusions from religion. Instead of being a source of liberation, our religions have become psychological traps. It is ironic that people have to leave religion as it was (and still is) practiced in order to understand and appreciate its meaning and to enjoy its benefits.

While in Baptist Sunday school, I began to look at the images they presented of God—that God was all loving, and that God was universal. If these claims are true, why do some people work very little and have so much, and why do others work so hard and have so little? If he is merciful, show me the mercy in this case? As a child, I could not ask these questions externally because I would be slapped down and it was impolite. I would be called "child of the devil."

Something grew in me early that I would have to grow to adulthood to understand. I am as religious as any person on earth and I had something that was above religion—spirituality! I was spiritual and that spirituality is the big umbrella under which religions function and out of which religions came. To be truly spiritual makes you a part of all religions without having to adhere to the mythology in any of them. But while growing up I had to brood and keep these impressions to myself. I had not worked out the images of all those white angels, a white God and white saints. I could not understand how of all the people who died down through the years, why not a single black or brown person got into heaven? Heaven was snow-white and even the devil was red.

What I grew up brooding over and confused by were the millions of impressions, ideas, and beliefs that see myself and my people outside the context of history. It appeared that we had no place in history, no place in religion, had contributed nothing to civilization and, therefore, could not exist or be acknowledge as of value as human beings in the present. This is what drove me to study history seriously and at an early age in my life. After reading the Bible my curiosity led me to encyclopedias, almanacs, and out of town newspapers. I used to even read movie magazines. Since I had good memory, I could remember the names of all of the movie stars, as well as the names of the stars' wives. This was pure nonsense and rubbish of no meaning to black people or to anyone else. Devoting my mind to nonsense occurred in school as well. Because I was a good student, I had to memorize all of the state capitals. I had to ask essential questions inside myself amidst a clutter of irrelevant information that those around seemed to think important.

When it became apparent to me that I wanted to do more serious reading, I left "Jim Crow" Columbus, Georgia, when I was eighteen. There was very little to hold me since my mother had died in 1922 when I was about seven. She was from the Mays family out of which came the famous baseball player, Willie Mays. My father's income was not enough for us to survive on. So she earned extra money as a washerwoman taking in white people's laundry. She did whole bundles from one white family for one dollar—wash and iron. Sometimes they would throw in the soap. Now, these same white people would call us "lazy people" on welfare. Yet for 300 years during our slavery and during "Jim Crow," white people were on welfare, and we paid for it.

After my mother nearly worked herself to death, I will never forget seeing her in that racially segregated hospital. The hospital was totally inadequate and it stank, literally stank. No one deserved to be put in such a place. But there she was, a beautiful woman, dying needlessly because whites denied us access to adequate hospital facilities. She died from pellagra, a disease caused by insufficient diet. It was bad enough being poor, but it was far worse being regarded as so utterly worthless as not even to deserve to be alive.

My mother was a beautiful quiet woman, who loved all of her children and tried to keep it a secret that I was her personal favorite. She told me so on her last day in the hospital. I knew that she would never come home. I hate hospitals to this day. Despite our short time together, she and two other women helped me to form a positive concept of myself. Besides my mother, there was my great grandmother who witnessed the last slaves bought over from Africa, and finally there was my fifth grade teacher who taught me to believe in myself. I feel the presence of those three women even today.

My mother's death was not the only event that prompted me to leave the South. There was my own circumstance. After my mother died. My father went back to Union Springs, Alabama,

chose another wife, and returned to Columbus, Georgia. I finished grammar school, and then I had to work because my family needed my financial support. Our poverty did not care that I was a good student. My jobs were to haul wood and take breakfast to my father and his co-workers. He worked in a brickyard where the men had to go to work very early. I would go to their houses, take their breakfasts to the men, and then go to school. There were six men. At the end of the week, I would get five cents from each. So I made 30 cents a week.

I was fortunate to be able to go to school at all. Only one child in each family living outside the city limits could go to the city school because you had to pay \$3.75 for a book fee. My father only made \$12 to \$15 per week and we needed every penny of it. So I was the one chosen from my family. All of my brothers and sisters believe to this day that they should have been chosen to go to school. For example, the last time I saw my brother, Alvin, in Detroit, we were eating together and I answered a question for his wife. He said smugly, "my brother went to the city school"—meaning that I had a terrible advantage over him.

I read as much as I could by picking up books from the white people I worked for and by borrowing books. Most of these white people had books for decoration and had not read them. I would go to the public library as if I was on an errand for a white person. Blacks could not use the library at the time. I would forge their name to take books out. My experience just calls to mind that the story has yet to be told of what black people in the South did in order to survive. We lived in an atmosphere tantamount to Nazism right here in the U.S. I swore that I would get out of the South when I could. Eighteen years was long enough.

Being "Taken In"

Miss Roselee took me in. She was a maid and cook in one of the white homes that I did chores in. I went to Miss Roselee and stayed there for four years. She had an old boarding-house that was an undeclared house of prostitution. That did not faze me because the ladies were nice to me and gave me school, lunch and church money. "Taking in" was a custom and substitute for adoption among blacks in the South. "Taking in" a young person was part of our humanity that we then took for granted and has now passed from us unnoticed. This was part of our extended family practices. But now extended families can no longer afford to do this for economic reasons.

We have not discussed "taking in" and other indigenous customs as part of how we survived. How is it that people would just take in a child with no paperwork and raise that child as their own straight up into manhood or womanhood, ask no questions, and not be compensated in any way? The people who explain blacks to white people have ignored our customs, and the things we did to survive and, in doing so, have done black people a great disservice. Clearly, I was better off "taken in" at a house of prostitution than I was at home because of our poverty. While "taken in" I was able to go to school where I completed the eighth grade.

I traveled by boxcar to Chicago in an unsuccessful attempt to get into the World's Fair in 1932. If you did not know anyone in Chicago to stay with and had no money, the police would not let you enter the city. I found myself back on a freight-train and on my way to Jersey City—a nickel ferry ride from New York City. I have lived in New York for over 50 years. What attracted me initially was the opportunity to go to WPA school at night. It did not matter then whether or not I graduated from high school. What was important to me was that I could read anything I wanted and as much as I could and could question anyone. My readings and associations led me to further questioning.

Radical Associations

I was immediately drawn to radical elements. They were the only ones who acknowledge our plight and attempted to do anything about it. I became active in the Young Communist League. I was never a member of the Communist Party, contrary to what many believed. As a matter of principle, if I had been a member of the Communist Party, I would have said so unashamedly. I was active with radicals who were committed to doing something. This is where those who claimed that I was a communist got mixed up. There were communist-sponsored activities where non-communists like myself were more effective and more active. For example, I was active in the Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon cases as a young street speaker and fundraiser. I was at the rallies and did things automatically.

My first act with the Young Communist League was to prevent Henry Winston and family from being evicted from their Lower East Side apartment. The law was written in such a way that if you are evicted and someone put your things back in the house, the marshal had to wait another thirty days to give you another eviction notice. In three days you could find another place to stay. So I was head of a group of young Turks who put their furniture back in the house. Henry and I remained friends, though we had some strong disagreements about Marxism.

When Henry wrote his book, *Strategy for a Black Agenda*, I was the only one to raise the question of whose black agenda? I had arrived at an important position in the 1930s—a position that has been verified by events in the communist world today. Communism and socialism were not monoliths to be applied in the same way in all nations. Each country will have to approach socialism based on its own needs and character. Poland is a good example. No matter how communist Poland becomes, they are going to remain Catholic. You can say religion is the opiate of the people and I might agree with you, but that will not change anything. Poles are going to remain Catholic. You can declare that Russia is an atheist nation all you want, but there are going to continue to be millions of religious people in Russia, including 30 million Moslems. I told Henry and other communists that they had to work from reality, not their ideological declarations. So if black people become socialist, we become Baptist socialists, Methodist socialists, holy-roller socialists, Father Divine socialists, and Moslem socialists. That is reality.

But a more telling critique of the left is in the study of African tribal societies—a study that Karl Marx missed. It is very clear that African tribal societies have successfully functioned for their people far longer than any nation devised by European thinkers. These tribal societies in their structure and administration were fundamentally socialist. They were socialist not only before Karl Marx was born, but before Europe was born. They did not wait for someone to ordain them "socialist" and say that they were "socialist." They never said once that they were socialist—they did not have to. Examine African tribal societies before they were interfered with by foreigners. There is nothing in socialism that they did not have. Africans had the purest form of socialism that ever existed on this earth.

So I have no problem with socialism if you take it from its African universal base. But if you take it solely from its European base, then I have an extreme problem with it. Then it is still based on the assumption of European dominance of the world. What European ideologies of the left and right do not understand is that they assume continued European dominance. They believe that,

if the world is to be socialist, it will be socialist under European dominance. If it is to be capitalist, it is to be capitalist under European dominance. I have problems with both assumptions. In contrast, if Africa had built its own enduring socialist societies all over the continent, it would be evident by no network of jails, no psychiatrists, no orphanages, and no old people's homes.

All of the social services we in the West have built outside the family would exist inside the family if the West had any kind of humanity. African tribal societies were far beyond where we in the West are right now and beyond where we say we hope to go. So it is time to examine what Africans had as a basis that we still need. Clearly we need to stop calling African societies "primitive." If they were primitive, why is it that their social order came before and has outlived every form of government and social order that this alleged Western civilization has ever devised? The key to all of our salvations as a people here, in Africa, and in Europe may be in the social wisdom of African tribal peoples.

Harlem Street Speakers

When I came to New York I first learned of the Harlem "street speakers." I do not know of any other place in the country where there was this tradition. The "street speakers" were men who stood on street corners expounding on the topics of the day. They had to be knowledgeable, relevant, good speakers, and able to hold their own, because their audiences were not passive. People would speak up from the crowd, and boo them away if they were outdone. The speakers on Lenox Avenue were considered to be the junior or "undergraduate" speakers. The Speakers on Seventh Avenue were the senior graduate speakers—the elite. You had to speak first on Lenox Ave. And could do so for years before you could get to Seventh Ave.

On Lenox Ave. there was Ras DeKiller, who I believe became the role model for the street speaker in Ralph Ellison's book, *Invisible Man*. On Seventh Ave., Arthur Reed was king and trained a young man named Ira Kemp. He sold dresses made by his family from door to door. Ira Kemp became the king of street speakers. Also on Seventh Ave. there was a young Dominican named Carlos Cook—arrogant as hell and a good speaker. Unknown to the audience, Cook's people owned brownstone houses in Harlem and were slum landlords. I coined the phrase "Carlos Cook is a crook." When he saw me in his audience, he would start blasting away, "we got to get rid of the traitors in our midst." When I would say something, he would turn towards me and say that "this man is a disgrace to the skin he wears." I was the only one to say that Carlos Cook was a hustler. Nonetheless, he was a very effective speaker and had a segment of the [Garvey](#) Movement in his following. Unfortunately, Cook and his Garveyite following misinterpreted Garvey. Carlos Cook passed on about 10 years ago.

The Harlem History Club

My formal introduction to history began in Harlem in the 1930s. I was active in the Harlem history club at the Harlem YMCA under Willis N. Huggins. I was fortunate enough to have met [Arthur Schomburg](#) and remembered reading his famous essay "[The Negro Digs up His Past](#)" while I was still in Georgia. I can say that it was Arthur Schomburg who taught me the interrelation of African history to world history. Willis N. Huggins taught me the political meaning of history. I would go to the lectures of William Leo Hansberry on the philosophical meaning of black history. The Harlem History Club was literally a graduate level history department with

some of the most important figures in black history right there in the middle of Harlem. I learned all that I could.

Some of the club's publications would include [John G. Jackson's](#) and Willis Huggins', "A Guide to the Study of African History." In this work, the references on Africa alone made it an important contribution. Besides his essay "The Negro Digs up His Past," Schomburg wrote a book entitled *The New Negro*. Huggins and Jackson later wrote an *Introduction to African Civilization*. I was being introduced to material and books I had never seen or heard of before. This would lead me to read more deeply. It might surprise you that H.G. Wells' *Outline of History*, despite its white supremacist views, is a good outline of history. It led me to read other works in history like Spingler's *Decline of the West* and the early works of Will Durant—the seven-volume *Story of Philosophy*.

John G. Jackson's works still have a great influence on me and this is evident in my inquiry into the role of religion as a force in history and the African origins of the legend of the Garden of Eden. He was one of the earliest scholars who attempted to separate myth from truth in biblical history. See his book [Pagan Origins of the Christ Myth](#) as well as his pamphlet *Christianity Before Christ*—later made into a book. His writing indicates that in some cases biblical stories were not true and were not meant to be true. The bible was meant to provide fables and myth to illustrate the truth. If you understand the truth from the illustrations, the bible has done what it was meant to do. For example, the story of the Exodus is told to illustrate that, at a given hour, God will come to the rescue of his people. It is a story on the ultimate goodness of God to rescue his people in their most desperate time. If you have real faith in yourself and God, the story is nothing more than that and has served its purpose.

Of particular value to me were William Hansberry's "Sources for the Study of Ethiopian History" and the writings of Charles Seiford, especially his unpublished "Who Are the Ethiopians?" In addition to the historic readings, I enjoyed a lot of good general writings such as the early fiction of Richard Wright. In fact, my writing style has been influenced by the white writers such as Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and other great writers who tried to take their writing into other dimensions that otherwise would not have been.

Dedication

I appreciate people with insight, white or black, who have looked for the fifth side of a four-sided square. This is what I have learned from writers who write well and thinkers who think well. Many young people, and older ones as well, have not developed the sense of challenge to seek out and find other people who do things well. We can all benefit from being exposed to the masters and respect the fact that what they do is something well done. Unfortunately, many scholars and writers today do not see the standard that they have to move up to. I am clearly partial to the works, writings, and thinking of our people's freedom movement, but I have no hesitation in going outside the movement to get any truth, idea, or theory that I think will add to what I have learned from my own people.

The writers and scholars in the Harlem history club were good writers and scholars, who were dedicated to their people and to history. They had little comfort or financial advantage. Being scholars meant that they had to pursue their work and live with economic uncertainty. There was uncertainty in their personal relations as well. They were expected to be ordinary men with ordinary interests when they were in fact extraordinary in who they were and what they did. They were not masochistic, yet many of them suffered at the hands of their wives, children and

friends. Despite lack of support and misunderstanding from those closest to them, they stuck to what they set out to do as men of dedication.

The necessity for dedication was expressed some years ago by an Englishman named Edmund O'Brian. He said "thinking is at its best when you make a priesthood out of duty." A writer could not do his best work before he understood the priesthood of his endeavor. You cannot express ideas well externally until you have made sense of them internally. All of the external material measures of success do not motivate or really reward the dedicated scholar. I know O'Brian's point well. My deepest disappointment has not been financial or for the years that I could not get a teaching position. My disappointment was in the lack of support from the two women I married.

Teaching

For years I could not get a regular teaching job. I taught in high schools, in the community, and in odd-ball places in the Depression years and after I came out of the Army in 1945. I did odd jobs for almost 20 years to support myself, my family, and my historical studies and research. Finally, in 1949, the administrator at the New School for Social Research had to fund an African Studies Center and I was allowed to give courses in the community. Later, I became head of the heritage teaching programme for Haryou Act, the first anti-poverty programme in Harlem. Then I was training head-start teachers at New York University.

All of these positions were on soft money lines. When the grant ran out, the job ran out. I could get those kind of jobs. I became known for my radical approach to teaching and as a teacher who documented things and proved my points. Sometimes I would work in the bank at night to supplement my income. Then James Turner expressed an interest in me coming to Cornell University and the black and Puerto Rican students at Hunter College wanted me to develop their curriculum as well. I was making a little money then as a consultant for CBS and was not ready to teach yet. So I told the Dean at Hunter College that I would do two courses for \$15,000 thinking they would tell me to go to hell. They accepted. To my Surprise I was hired at Hunter College and, for the first time in my life. I was paid \$15,000 per year to teach two courses. The students told them to hire me and this was not a time when administrations ignored their students' wishes.

Research Topics

If I were able to direct a new generation of students in historical studies, I would have them do a number of studies that are not being done. We need to see general studies as well as detailed specializations on the peoples and cultures of the world. The work on Africa, Asia and Europe, that European scholars initiated in the nineteenth century, needs to be carefully reviewed. We will undoubtedly find much to re-do without the assumptions and bias of European supremacy. We need to see students trained in the different periods of African history, doing studies of European peoples in the same periods. What they would look to study are the connections and interactions between Africans and Europeans.

New European Studies

In particular, there is a need for Africanists to study the emergence of Europe from 1400 to 1600 AD. This period was a critical turning point in the history of the world. We need studies of the 700 years before 1400 AD when Islamic Africans, Arabs, and Berbers had isolated Europe,

controlling commerce in the Mediterranean. Europe was hemmed in and struggling with its own internal conflicts. The Crusades gave Europe an external reason for certain ideas and certain people to dominate. In the process, a lot of pressure was taken off the Catholic Church to reform and Europe was forced to look at the world beyond itself.

Europeans looked at the world beyond Europe and realized that they could not conquer it, not until they learned maritime skill. This maritime knowledge, primarily from China, was translated at the University of Salamanca in Spain by Arab, African and Berber scholars. The acquisition of this knowledge by Europeans in the 1400s is an essential turning point in world history. Europeans would now punish the world for what it had suffered at its own hands and because of its own failures during the period between the decline of the Roman Empire and the second rise of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Within this 200-year rise, they would turn to Christianity to justify their criminal assault on the rest of the world. With religious justification and at best the church's indifference, they created and expanded the slave trade and the expansion of European people in settler nations beyond Europe. This period needs to be studied specifically with attention to the impact it had on African and Asian peoples.

Consider two small points. First, Europe is really not a continent. It is a part of Asia. Europe does not qualify as a continent by the dictionary definition of a continent. Second, Europeans are multiracial. These two points have major implications for how we view European cultures and the European identity. We need more work which looks at the ways that European scholars used to argue that Egypt was not a part of Africa. We need to study the relationship of Egypt to the rest of Africa, especially before the European distortion of their own and Egyptian history.

For students to understand the twenty-first century, they must understand the centuries of disruption that led us to where we are today. We really have to study the last 500 years of world history and the last 500 years of disruption in favor of Europe and the downgrading of other peoples. Once things are placed in their proper historical perspective, they might have a better idea of where the world can go tomorrow.

South America and the Caribbean

We need to study South America where the majority of the population is neither black nor white and could go either way in whom they identify with, depending on the future flow of world power. South Americans, in particular Brazilians, claim white or European preferences because they assume that blacks and African peoples will not come to power in the world community. We need to study the formation of nations in South America and the slow destruction of Indian cultures in Mexico and in Canada. There needs to be in-depth studies of the destruction of indigenous cultures in both South and North America. There have been no in-depth studies of how these people came to America since they are supposed to be of Asian descent. The Asian ancestors of North and South American Indians could have come due to curiosity, or overcrowding. They could have been cattle-raising people who needed space. By studying the Asian migration patterns I have not been able to identify a disruptive period in Asian history that would have made that many people want to leave Asia.

What happened to the indigenous people of the Caribbean? They have disappeared. We need to study the Caribbean mentality after 1850 because the Caribbeans had a rebellious mentality up until the middle of that century. They identified themselves specifically with Africa, but they lost this after 1850 and became imitation-English, imitation-Dutch, imitation-Spanish, and now they have a color complex indicative of a confused racial identity. At what point did they lose

their revolutionary attitude, and start to refer to their heritage from the viewpoint of their colonial masters?

Historic Africa

Africa as a place of history, migrations, cultures and influences on the world is older than Europe and is rich and diverse in all human experiences. Yet we still know so little about Africa as a place with people central to world history and to the future. We need studies of the migration patterns of the peoples of Africa and the impact those migrations have had on present cultures. This would mean looking at the infusion of one African culture into another, creating still another culture that had vitality. The Ashanti and the Fante social order and world systems are examples. These people of the Upper Niger migrated and blended cultures.

We need to study cultural retentions where Africans have held on to their culture through centuries of wars and all sorts of other difficulties. They have held on to their concept of nation and concept of self. A good example is the Zulu. The Zulu nation is not South African in origin. They have East African origins and were called "Inguana." They migrated to central Africa and then down to South Africa. We need to study the marital and courtship habits of some Africans, such as the Herro who pledge to bring virginity to their wedding bed, in contrast with the Mandi who have trial marriages. Among the Mandi the couple live together and have two or three children before they are married later with a big ceremony. In cases where they do not marry, the children belong to the family of the wife because their lineage is matrilineal. Whoever later marries her becomes the guardian of the children she had by the previous man. This is a very civilized custom.

We need to study Africa since 1957 with the beginning of the independence explosion when African states started to receive their so-called independence. What happened? Africa may have gone down the wrong road to freedom because we did not first have stable African states. There was no African state methodology, and we did not observe African political traditionalisms. What we adopted were European parliamentary forms. Africa should have adopted some form of African traditionalism in government. As a result, I see where so-called independence has done more harm than good. The methods and directions towards independence we took should be an issue with in critical studies of neo-colonialism. It would have made a great difference if there had been one African state in existence with stability and vitality. It would have been a role model for other African states. But the former colonial powers do not intend any one state to be such a role model.

The USA

We need to study the period between 1619 and 1776 in America history. Very little is said about what happened between the arrival in Jamestown, Virginia, and the American Revolution. Very little has been said about the contradictions of the American Revolution. In fact, the American Revolution and its proclamation of liberty and democracy was a contradiction because it was clearly not meant for African Americans—we had not been accepted as citizens. Northerners and Southerners had no difficulty in classifying us as three-fifths of a person.

Southerners voted according to our presence in their political constituency. A white man could cast votes for us without our consent as though we were cattle. Liberty and justice for all did not

include people of African descent. We need to study the small number of freedmen in the South who were stripped to the point of not being free—who were they, why did they stay, what did they think, and how did they maintain their free status? Many of them were craftsmen, barbers, builders and blacksmiths. They were restricted in where they could go, and what they could do. When they went into a new town, they had to give notice. They were watched, and had to carry papers on them at all times. This was humiliating. I challenge the idea that they were free. They just had a little more ability to move about a little more than bondsmen. We know even less about the status and experiences of New England freedmen.

Asia

We need to investigate the large historic African presence in Asia, especially in India where there are 100 million people of partly African descent. We need to investigate the African presence in the pacific islands. There are entire nations made up of people of African extraction. We need to investigate Australia before the British destroyed its black inhabitants. [Tasmania](#) was black before the British destroyed every man, woman and child on the island.

The Future

African Americans will play a key role in the new and second political awakening of African peoples. Despite our subordinate domestic status, African Americans are already the most politically active Africans outside Africa. The first political awakening was with [Nkrumah](#) in the independence of Ghana. The second will have to be based on the various nationalisms, Pan-Africanisms, and other forms of African unity that go across all religious and political lines. We can no longer discuss who is Baptist, who is Protestant, etc. If you are African, even if you are a Moslem, being African will have to take precedence over what else you are.

By asserting that there will be new a African awakening does not mean that I am ignoring the declining African American domestic plight. The destruction of black communities in the U.S. is very deliberate and the power and responsibility for this destruction rests squarely on the shoulders of government and economic leaders. They know that, if we succeed in building sound communities after all that we have been put through, we can build and run a nation. Successful communities are small role models for a successful nation. It is from the community that you get the ideas and impetus to build a nation. Those who do not want us to come to power are intent on keeping our communities so disrupted that we will never build a sound community. And these people behind this destruction are not black (no black men or women have that kind of power), do not live in our community, and cannot succeed forever.

Conclusion

We have a lot of scholars, writers and politicians doing more talking than writing and more talking than acting. We have enough actors. We have enough people to talk about us and to beg. We now need people who understand what real liberation is all about and who will act to make positive change for black people happen.

Our people and scholars are focusing on their "blackness" as an historic and cultural value. They struggle and are confused about whiteness, which is everywhere, and everything good and of value in this culture. But this does not always mean that self-appreciation is lacking. What is lacking is a proper value on blackness. I think a lot of black scholars are misleading us with statistics and charts and examples that do not make sense. They are explaining us to

whites and their explanations make no sense to black people. Their unwillingness to come before black people and explain their explanations suggests that they do not believe their own explanations. Once we solve the internal problem of who we are, we can solve the external problem of what we will be.

It is understandable why I would grow up to fight Jim Crow and racial prejudice and the separation of races. I have literally risked my life fighting these things because I knew racial hatred and ignorance was so damned unnecessary. I also knew one other thing: if there is a superior race in the world, it damned well is not white people. I have always been clear on this point from early in my life.

No people can do to other people what they have done to the world. European culture has produced people who are terribly insecure and frightened. No one on this earth should tremble at the sight of them. I would fear because a coward has the upper hand and not because he is brave. He is not brave. That is something I will never get out of my mind.

If I ever have any influence over a state, the first thing I would build is a decent hospital—some place to care for children and old people. A civilization has to be measured by how it takes care of its old and its very young.

